

Radiating Fear

In dire need of a plan to protect nuclear power plants

by Michael Collins
Governor Gray Davis drew ire last week for releasing a confidential FBI warning that four of California’s bridges could be terrorist targets. The governor, it seemed, was doing too much in the “war on terrorism.” For some time, though, environmental activists have criticized Davis for not doing *enough* to prevent attacks on the state’s two nuclear power plants — San Onofre and Diablo Canyon.

Some perfunctory steps have been taken to protect the plants. For example, in response to the FBI’s security alert late last month, the FAA decreed that private planes could not fly within 12 miles — nor, vertically, below 18,000 feet — of 86 nuclear sites around the country. The ban ended Tuesday, worrying one of the world’s top nuclear-terrorism experts, Dr. Bennett Ramberg, vice chairman of the Los Angeles-based Center for Government and Public Policy Analysis and author of *Nuclear Power Plants as Weapons for the Enemy: An Unrecognized Military Peril* (University of California Press). He believes that by ending the FAA prohibition, the U.S. is failing to seriously address the threat to its 103 nuclear-power complexes in 31 states.

“For over 20 years, I’ve tried to get the government to toughen up regulations,” Ramberg told the *Weekly*, “but even now they are moving at a snail’s pace, despite the obvious threat.”

Ramberg went on to challenge the governor: “Davis should immediately send the National Guard to protect our plants, and they should be equipped with anti-aircraft batteries,” Ramberg said. “Even if the odds of attack are very low, the repercussions of reactor sabotage are extraordinarily high and [the effects] long-lasting.”

It’s an idea that has gained a measure of support across the U.S. Thirteen states have stationed National Guardsmen, albeit without anti-aircraft weapons, at nuclear power plants. Congress is also considering legislation that would toughen up nuclear-plant security, including an increased role for the National Guard. Rep. Ed Markey (D-Massachusetts), who introduced the legislation, said guardsmen should be equipped with anti-aircraft artillery. The thinking is that all the conventional security in the world will do little to halt an attack from the air. (Jurisdiction over nuclear power plants usually falls to the federal government; on security issues, however, Congress, the governor or the president can issue orders to the National Guard.)

Davis’ press secretary, Steve Maviglio, said the governor is considering a new plan for nuclear-plant security: “We have a plan under review, and we hope to make a decision shortly.”

Regulations to guard plants are based on decades-old scenarios involving no more than “several” attackers acting as one team, with only one insider and using hand-held weapons and explosives. No plans to protect plants from planes or boats are in place. Indeed, if one or more bomb-laden private planes were to hit a reactor’s concrete dome or external power units, it could very likely cause a meltdown. If San Onofre’s two reactors were hit and melted down, it could cause hundreds of thousands of cancers and genetic defects, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC). The immediate damage of a Diablo Canyon meltdown could spread through San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

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The September 11 attacks on the World Trader Center and Pentagon have made the threat appear more real. Ahmed Ressam, an Algerian arrested as he crossed into the United States from Canada just before the new millennium, recently testified at the trial of another terrorist that the Osama bin Laden terrorist camps are training attackers in what they call “urban warfare” and “enemy installation,” including nuclear power plants. In late October, it was reported in the *Times* of London that the FBI sent information to its British counterpart, MI5, that the fourth plane that crashed in Pennsylvania may have been headed toward the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant.

Nuclear-power facilities are vulnerable despite having walls of thick concrete meshed in re-bar. If the electrical power lines to a plant were cut, the reactor would automatically shut down unless relatively unfortified backup generators were disabled. This could lead to a meltdown. Likewise if saboteurs cut off or clog the water supply to the reactors. Spent nuclear-fuel dry casks and cooling ponds for “hot” fuel rods could be set afire with incendiary weapons, which makes them the most vulnerable targets at the plants.

Southern California Edison, which operates San Onofre, maintains that the complex is safe despite the lifting of the FAA flight ban. The company has increased its use of automatic-gun-toting retired police and military personnel in and around the plant. The company has added concrete barriers and obstacles, and has a security boat patrolling the site’s Pacific Coast perimeter. A more elaborate system to identify employees has also been established. “We’re at the highest state of alert,” Steve Conroy, SCE’s manager of media relations, told the *Weekly*. Said Jeff Lewis, a spokesman for Pacific Gas & Electric, which operates Diablo Canyon, “People have told me that it’s easier to get into the White House.”

But the safety record of nuke plants has been abysmal. Between 1991 and 1998, the NRC has conducted mock attacks at 68 plants. Nearly half the time, security measures flunked the test, even though the plants were warned of the simulated assaults six months in advance. Officials point out, however, that San Onofre is on U.S. Marine-owned land, and that troops would triumph in the advent of any attack. But a mock NRC assault on the facility before September 11 revealed that to “penetrate the perimeter fence and breach the access control barrier” took just 18 seconds.

Longtime NRC critic Markey’s stringent nuclear-plant legislation passed out of the House Energy and Commerce Committee last week, but it could take as long as six months to finally make it to President Bush.

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